Sri Lanka to embark technology for sp

BY SHADIMA ALI AHAMAD

“Sri Lanka needs to adopt to emerging technological advancements if it is to achieve rapid economic development.”

Senior Minister for Scientific Affairs Professor Tissa Vitharana stated this at the ‘Nanotechnology for National Development’ seminar facilitated by the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka (NASL).

With the aim of increasing high technology exports from 1.5% to 10% by 2015, the minister opined that achieving the task within the set period will be a challenge, as only 0.14% from the national income is allocated for investments in science and technology.

Disproving the perception that Sri Lanka is unable to contribute to technological advancements, Vitharana stated that “we need to break out of this”. “Active participation should take place in the ongoing rise of nanotechnology before the bus is missed once again,” he added referring to the opportunities overlooked by Sri Lanka when electronics, ICT, and biotech revolutions were taking place around the world.

Acknowledging innovation and technology as engines to drive faster economic growth, Vitharana shared the R&D (research and development) status of Sri Lanka. He noted that a poor commercialisation culture, limited investments by local industries, ad hoc projects instead of focused programs, and less industrial focus is prevalent in the current R&D scenario.

“Due to this, no significant contribution of R&D has been made by the state sector for wealth creation,” he said. As a result, Vitharana said that low visibility, outdated infrastructure, and inadequate human resources were the outcome.

With the 21st century being swept up with nanotechnology, Vitharana expressed that the National Nanotechnology Initiative (NNI) established in 2006 attempted to maximise utilisation of the nation’s limited science and technology resources by converting it into a single initiative so that rapid takeoff of the national economy in partnership with local industry could take place.

Speaking on the establishment of the Sri Lankan Institute of Nanotechnology (SLUNTEC), Vitharana said that the initial plan was to set up the institute entirely as a government entity. However, having faced difficulties in funding the initiative, the private sector was enthused.

He attributed its success to the Public Private Partnership (PPP) established, which has seen high-end technology initiatives such as nanotechnology plant nutrition being sold to the Nagarjuna Group India for US$1 billion. “The initial attempt to be a catalyst to change the existing national research and innovation system along with the mindset of the nation,” he said.

Vitharana elaborated that the change was certainly noticed, since within just nine months of the SLUNTEC laboratories being set, five US patents were filed. “This was an achievement since in Sri Lanka an average of two patents per year is what gets filed,” he said while adding that each patent was sold for over US$1 million.

Emphasising that the establishment of the NNI has proved that Sri Lankan scientists could perform, he said that it also ignited the concept of innovation in the private sector. “The private sector underwent a change in mindset. They were understimating the importance of science, technology, and innovation in their operational services,” Vitharana said.

Learning for growth

With the country’s national economic output being valued at US$20 million, a presentation at the seminar showed that the economic productivity per person stands at US$195.

Examining the economic growth rate over the past few years, SLUNTEC Research and Innovation Chief/University of Cambridge Professor Gehan Amaratunge acknowledged that since 2009, the nation grew at an average rate of 7% per annum. With the Government having a vision of reaching a US$4000 per capita income by 2030, Amaratunge questioned if the set could be achieved since the country is noted to be deviating from the projected growth rate.

“We are on a staggered curve at the moment. To get back on track, it is imperative for us to have a non-linear expansion in the value of economic output,” he said.

Pondering on how the stated could be achieved, Amaratunge recommended measures on how fast phased economic growth could be realised. Highlighting three routes that could be followed, he said: “We need to do more of the same. That is to have more people achieve the same output per person as at present.” Amaratunge expressed that he felt the nation could not afford to continue on this path since the rest of the output population would be exhausted.

With Sri Lanka having a good record of its population for employability, Amaratunge pointed out the drawbacks of nearly US$5.6 billion using 14% to the GDP. He said that the reality is that the population and therefore ways of tackling narike should be recognized that the greatly highlight boost and FDI flows could but felt that it is not sustainable.

“The output per worker up so that the value per is increased,” he said. While gain developed economies through automation, he cited that this should also be considered if it is hopes to labour shortage and remain on the global stage.

Sharing the final route to sustainable development, he st